Wistful thinking: Making Inuit labour and the Nanisivik mine near Ikpiarjuk (Arctic Bay), northern Baffin Island

Intégration des Inuit au marché du travail et planification de la mine Nanisivik près d'Ikpiarjuk (Arctic Bay), au nord de la Terre de Baffin

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article scrute le discours sur les Inuit en ce qui concerne les questions d'emploi et leur réponse à «ce qui était bon pour eux» à l'intersection de la pensée coloniale et postcoloniale des années 1970. Les tentatives visant à intégrer les Inuit à une économie industrielle moderne ont eu lieu juste après que ceux-ci aient abandonné leur mode d'existence basé sur la chasse et le piégeage pour s'établir dans de nouvelles communautés en développement dans l'Arctique de l'Est. Nous examinons la phase de planification (1970-1976) de la mine Nanisivik à Strathcona Sound, sur la pointe nord de la Terre de Baffin. La mine a été en opération de 1976 à 2002. En nous appuyant sur les travaux de James O'Connor dans les années 1970 et sur les concepts de légitimation et de fonctions d'accumulation de l'État, tout en utilisant les documents d'archives du ministère des Affaires indiennes et du Développement du Nord, et celui de l'Énergie, des Mines et des Ressources, nous explorons de quelle manière les Inuit ont été définis comme des «travailleurs en besoin d'emploi». En examinant le débat entre les responsables de ces départements, nous cherchons à savoir dans quelle mesure d'autres besoins, basés sur l'expérience de la mine de nickel de Rankin Inlet (1957-1962), sont restés insatisfaits. La résistance des Inuit à être définis comme une main-d'œuvre et la relation entre les Inuit en tant que chasseurs et employés salariés sont explorées en référence à l'exploitation minière contemporaine au Nunavut.

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Abstract: Wistful thinking: Making Inuit labour and the Nanisivik mine near Ikpiarjuk (Arctic Bay), northern Baffin Island

This article interrogates discourse about Inuit in relation to employment issues and the Inuit response to “what was good for them” at the intersection of colonial and postcolonial thought in the 1970s. Attempts to integrate Inuit with a modern industrial economy occurred after Inuit had moved, or been moved, from land-based hunting and trapping camps to new settlements developing in the eastern Arctic. We examine the planning stage (1970-1976) of the Nanisivik

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mine at Strathcona Sound on the northern tip of Baffin Island that operated from 1976 until 2002. Building on the work of James O'Connor in the early 1970s and concepts of legitimisation and accumulation functions of the State, and using the archival records of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and the Department of Energy, Mines, and Resources, we explore the extent to which Inuit were constructed as “labour in need of employment.” In examining debate between officials of these departments, we seek to find out to what extent other needs went unmet, based on experience with the Rankin Inlet Nickel Mine (1957-1962). Inuit resistance to this definition and the relationship between Inuit as hunters and Inuit as wage earners are explored with reference to contemporary mining development in Nunavut.

Introduction

In the Canadian Arctic, the period after World War II was one of rapid social and cultural change. Between 1955 and 1970, virtually all Inuit moved from semi-nomadic, family-based hunting and trapping camps to consolidated settlements located—with the exception of the inland community of Qamani'tuaq (Baker Lake)—along Canada's extensive Arctic coast. This “journey” has been studied from different theoretical perspectives, documented by journalists, and recounted by Inuit who experienced what may have been the most rapid social and cultural change of any Indigenous people in recorded history (Damas 2002; Honigmann and Honigmann 1970; Iglauer 1966; Okpik 2005; Tester and Kulchyski 1994). The modernisation agenda of the State focused on alternative employment, following the collapse of the fox-fur trade that had supported Inuit since the first Arctic Hudson's Bay Company post had opened in 1911 at Kimmirut, Baffin Island. Mining became an increasingly important focus of Canadian economic development in the postwar period, including attention to the mineral potential of the eastern Arctic. The development of mines at Rankin Inlet (1957-1962), the Polaris Mine on Little Cornwallis Island in the High Arctic (1981-2002), and the Nanisivik mine near Ikpiarjuk on northern Baffin Island (1976-2002) (Figure 1) were seen as important initiatives in meeting the employment needs of a population that, with the move to settlements, was in need of cash income, having become increasingly dependent on social assistance and other government transfers.

This article interrogates discourse about Inuit employment issues and the Inuit response to “what was good for them” at the intersection of colonial and postcolonial thought in the 1970s, following their movement from land-based camps and a trapping economy to settlement living and attempts to assimilate them to the logic of industrial capitalism. The paper focuses on discussions about Inuit as potential employees of the Nanisivik mine during the planning and development phases (1972-1977). We look at the social construction of Inuit during the planning process for the Nanisivik mine in relation to prior experiences with the North Rankin Nickel Mine and government policy. The archival sources belong primarily to the Government of Canada and the former federal Department of Energy, Mines, and Resources.

Figure 1. Northern Baffin Island, showing the location of Mineral Resources International (Nanisivik Mine) and Arctic Bay (Ikpiarjuk). Adapted from Watts, Griffis and McOuat Ltd (1973) in Yates (1975).

Prior to the mid-1950s, government policy in the Arctic stressed the importance of Inuit participation in a regional economy characterised by the presence of a near-monopoly—the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC), as old as mercantile capitalism itself—employing Inuit primarily in the trapping of white fox. Trapping afforded them a subsistence and largely independent lifestyle (Brody 1975; Coates 1985). The State had a vested interest in maintaining this system as long as possible, thereby avoiding what it saw as the dependency created among First Nations in southern Canada (Shewell and Spagnut 1995). The State went as far as authorising the relocation of Inuit in attempts to maintain this relationship, the movement of Inuit to Devon Island by the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1934 being an example (Tester and Kulchyski 1994).

All of this changed with the collapse of the fox-fur trade following World War II. Prices fell from \$25 a pelt in 1945 to as low as \$3.50 in 1949 (*ibid.*). By 1953, they had recovered to only about \$12. Inuit could no longer complement their lifestyles with the goods made affordable by trapping. Confronted with the ravages of tuberculosis, pressure to send their children to residential and federal day schools, and the lure of religious holidays and celebrations “in town,” Inuit relocated (and in some cases were relocated) to Arctic settlements. What followed was a period of debilitating welfare relations, broken by attempts to introduce Inuit to industrial employment. These efforts included employment on the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line in 1956-57 and the opening of the North Rankin Nickel Mine in 1957. Further attempts to initiate commercial activity based on harvesting of eider down, carving, printmaking, boat-building, and fishing introduced Inuit to wage employment and settlement living. Mining offered new hope for assimilation of Inuit into a modern industrial economy.

Legitimisation and accumulation functions of the State

This history and the impacts of mining on northern people and landscapes have received increasing attention in recent years in response to the perception—in relation to climate change, land claims, and other developments—that mining and oil and gas development are the economic future of the Northwest Territories and Nunavut (MacPherson 2003; Prowse et al. 2009). Legacies of mining in the Canadian Arctic and Aboriginal participation have been examined from different perspectives. Some authors are benignly descriptive, focusing on social, environmental, and material outcomes. In a review of the socio-economic impacts of the Nanisivik and Polaris mines, Bowes-Lyon et al. (2009) conclude that these operations left virtually no legacy. “The Nanisivik and Polaris mines did not provide an environment that promoted sustainable development to the communities closest to them because the benefits that the mines brought to the communities did not persist after mine closure” (*ibid.*: 393). They are nonetheless optimistic that technical and institutional changes—land claims agreements and impact benefit agreements (IBAs)—can improve the outcome of mining ventures. However, recent examinations of IBAs and their implementation suggest they do not necessarily contribute to critical examination of the impacts of development or even to implementation of effective mitigation measures (Caine and Krogman 2010; Czyzewski et al. *in press*). Harvey (1996) calls this faith in technical and institutional

measures “ecological modernization.” The key word is sustainability and the assumption is that management and control can be a “win-win” scenario for both development and the environment. This “not-uncommon perspective” is embraced by vested interest groups like the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (Warden-Fernandez 2001), with a commitment to corporate social responsibility (CSR) that is wide-open to question (Blowfield and Frynas 2005). The historical record of northern development points to many failed attempts to manage resources wisely using scientific knowledge (Piper 2009).

With these considerations in mind, we concentrate on the contradictory and sometimes complimentary roles of accumulation and legitimisation played by the State in development of the Nanisivik mine. Our focus is on what Sandlos and Keeling (2012: 33) have called “the wider ideological and political contexts shaping the establishment and fate of mining districts.” The functional approach taken, drawing upon the work of O’Connor (1973), may be criticised for underplaying postmodern examination of contrary discourses. We suggest that the role of discourse in facilitating capital accumulation must be understood within the confines of exigencies of capitalist development, including growth, profit, and competition. While the relationship between words and functions is dialogical, these exigencies, backed by the power and resources of capital, play a commanding role in the articulation and execution of State functions. Actors both within and without the State can typically counter these exigencies only in part, being more successful at certain historical moments.

When actors respond to complimentary and contradictory State functions, their language is itself nested in, or a reaction to, attempts at totalisation *as a praxis-project* (Sartre 1991: 301): a developing activity that attempts to make disparate elements (including Aboriginal people, all that they are, and their resources) part of capitalism as a synthetic and contrived whole. Dispossession is part of this attempt (Harvey 1996). We are indebted to Kulchyski’s (2005) reference to Jameson’s (1994) counter of the claim that totalisation is a reference to anything complete, with illusions of truth or a system, the articulation of which is a repression of difference. To quote Jameson (1994: 65): “on any meaningful usage—that is to say, one for which totalization is a project rather than the word for an already existent institution—the project means the complex negotiation of all these individual differences.” Resistance is an element of negotiation. In what follows we examine debates about the Nanisivik mine and Inuit participation occurring among State actors in Indian and Northern Affairs and the Department of Energy, Mines, and Resources, with attention to Inuit resistance.

O’Connor (1973), writing in the early 1970s in response to difficulties that Keynesian economic logic was encountering with rising unemployment, government deficits, and inflation, argues that the State is burdened with two principal functions: *legitimation* and *accumulation*. Legitimation refers to processes and initiatives by which the State attempts to maintain harmonious social conditions—and thus its legitimacy—thereby compensating for the inequities and worst ravages of capitalist expansion. The State’s other essential role is to aid and abet the accumulation of capital. It puts in place rules and regulations to facilitate conditions under which

capitalism can flourish; “a state that ignores the necessity of assisting the process of capital accumulation risks drying up the source of its own power, the economy’s surplus production capacity and the taxes drawn from this surplus (and other forms of capital)” (ibid.: 6). These dual roles are often, but not necessarily, contradictory. For example, the Canadian health care system (legitimation) is attractive to manufacturers such as auto makers, as it saves the cost of providing employees with private insurance (accumulation) (Canadian Auto Workers 2012).

The introduction of the Family Allowance in 1945—with many Inuit children not registered until 1949—established the first clear ties between Inuit and Canada’s postwar, semi-liberal welfare state. The Family Allowance was a clear example of legitimisation, although putting money into the pockets of women who would spend it on their children was not incompatible with the State’s accumulation function. In the North, the HBC was the ultimate beneficiary. The initiative thus received wide support from politicians of all ideological persuasions (Blake 2009). De-commodified interventions in market economies run contrary to the mandate to facilitate the private accumulation of capital. For example, when expenditures on educational initiatives do not seem to produce citizens with marketable skills, this spending may meet the interests of a student population (i.e. is legitimising) but may be severely criticised if it contributes little to training a workforce for roles related to capital accumulation. Offe (1984: 16) explains the State’s occasional contradictory functions this way: at any given time the modern welfare state will seek to “maintain the economic dominance of capital, to challenge and erode its power, and to compensate for its disruptive and disorganizing consequences.”

***Qallunaat*¹ assessments of Inuit and of Ikpiarjuk**

The area surrounding Ikpiarjuk was prospected during the mid-1950s based on reports about mineralisation dating back to 1910.² An American company, Texasgulf Inc., had staked claims in 1957 to a lead-zinc ore body at Strathcona Sound, northeast of the community. In 1970, Texasgulf began negotiating an export license in anticipation of mining the reserve, but, in a climate of Canadian nationalism and given the company’s inexperience with the Canadian political system, these efforts were to no avail. In 1972, Texasgulf exchanged its title in a swap for comparable holdings in Latin America held by Calgary-based Mineral Resources International Limited (MRI). MRI completed a feasibility study by the fall of 1973. The report was positive about the mine’s commercial potential but the mine’s viability would also depend on federal government subsidies.

¹ In Inuktitut, *Qallunaat* is the word used for white people or Europeans.

² Minerals in the Strathcona Sound area were first discovered in 1910 by prospectors Albert English and Alfred Tremblay during the government-sponsored expedition of Captain J.E. Bernier. The general area was mapped by dog-team with the assistance of local Inuit (Gibson 1978; McPherson 2003).

Within the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND),³ the key government decision-maker in the project, the mine was initially considered “privately and socially marginal” in light of government assistance totalling \$8.8 million in non-recoverable expenditures and \$7.9 million in loans (DIAND 1974a). Although MRI had assumed an economically optimal exploitation rate of eight years, DIAND officials insisted on a 15-year life in order to promote “longer-term benefits”⁴ (Gibson 1978). A 12-year life was finally agreed upon, with commitments by MRI to invest in further exploration in return for the government’s substantial investment in infrastructure (DIAND 1974b). MRI acquired further capital for development from Dutch and West German sources interested in the lead-zinc concentrate (Agar 1977; Yates 1975). The terms of this agreement explain DIAND’s urgency in supporting the mine, as the “agreement between MRI and its European backers” was to expire June 30, 1974 “unless the Crown agree(d) to give government assistance to the project” (Verity 1974: 1). “Urgency” meant that no social or environmental assessment, or consideration of the project’s relation to Inuit or Inuit employment, was conducted before approval.

Frank Agar, then president of MRI, described his first encounter with Ikpiarjuk as follows:

There were animal skins and parts and sleds and skidoos and everything in all directions and under the houses and in front of them and so on. And [...] by that time we knew the history of the Inuit, that they were self-sufficient [...]. We thought, ‘what the hell have we done to these people?’ [Brought them] in and put them in these villages. [...] [they] can hunt and fish, but not to the extent of paying for the gasoline for the skidoo. So, in essence, it looked to us like an Indian reservation, in the sense that they were totally dependent on [the white man] to finance everything, and he was telling [Inuit] what to do. We didn’t like it. I didn’t like it (Frank Agar in Tester 2012).

Agar also reflected, “[...] once I got to meet [Inuit] and talk to them and so on, particularly the young guys, I really felt sorry for them. Trapped between a Stone Age culture and [...] 737s flying overhead” (ibid.). Agar believed that Inuit would benefit from mine employment. Inuit youth, in Agar’s assessment were trapped. They needed a ticket to the modern, 737-fueled world. Agar was about to offer it.

Agar’s perspective as a geological engineer was little informed by the historical circumstances outlined in the introduction to this article. His verbal horizon did not extend, understandably, to the contributions of the HBC to Inuit social history, to the exigencies of capital accumulation relevant to conditions faced by Inuit of Ikpiarjuk as a result of their increased sedentarisation, and to the complex factors that brought them to Ikpiarjuk. Responsibility for “things gone wrong”—by implication, welfare

³ Now called Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada. At the time of signing, Indian Affairs and Northern Development was the department’s official title, although it referred to itself as Indian and Northern Affairs.

⁴ Given an ore body of determined size, this counter-proposal meant extracting the ore at a slower rate and with lower earnings while working hard to prove a larger reserve.

dependency—is laid at the feet of government, the result not merely of ideological convictions, but of discourse—and subsequently convictions—too little informed by critical historical analysis. Agar’s perspective conjures up the public servant’s worst fears for Inuit: dependency and a fate paralleling First Nations people in the rest of the country. His references to “skins and parts and sleds and skidoos” sculpt the landscape of a hunting culture in disarray, which cannot meet its own needs and where material and institutional chaos is the result of transitioning from one culture to another. The solution is wage employment.

On 18 June 1974, Jean Chrétien, then Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, signed the Strathcona Agreement with MRI. The Government of Canada invested \$16.7 million in development of the project’s town site, dock, and airstrip in exchange for an 18% equity interest in a new company, Nanisivik⁵ Mines Ltd. (DIAND 1974a, 1974b; EMR 1974). MRI owned 59.5% of Nanisivik Mines Ltd. Dutch and German interests received 11.25% each (MRI 1975). Construction began in the spring of 1974. The mine was fully operational by October 1976 (Baffin Region Inuit Association 1980).

The federal government’s involvement with the project can be rationalised with reference to *Canada’s North: 1970-1980*, a 1972 public relations document produced by DIAND. It emphasises the importance of developing the North’s resources (an accumulation function) and, in the presence of a growing concern in industrialised nations about environmental degradation, the importance of protecting the environment (a legitimisation function). However, the document claimed that the government’s heaviest emphasis was “on the needs and aspirations of the native peoples” (DIAND 1972: 11). “Need” is an open-ended concept met by *both* accumulation and legitimisation functions of the State. What were the needs of Inuit in Ikpiarjuk at this historical moment? What were their aspirations? How were these to be determined? By whom? How would they be met? The text of *Canada’s North: 1970-1980* suggests the State had already answered these questions. The region’s most pressing need was articulated then—as now—as:

[...] the need to create employment opportunities for native northerners. The indigenous labour force is expanding quite rapidly but unless the native peoples are adequately trained and prepared for wage employment, they may not be able to take advantage of growing job opportunities. The problem is one of education and training, of influencing potential employers and prospective employees, and also of diversifying economic activities (DIAND 1972: 15).

Inuit are defined as a “labour force” to be prepared for “wage employment” so they can take advantage of “job opportunities.” The focus is on “education and training” and “diversifying *economic* activities.” The text outlines what is needed to produce an industrial labour force and a modern wage economy. Among the methods outlined in the document:

⁵ In Inuktitut, Nanisivik means ‘the place where people find things.’

Liberalize education and training techniques to produce more quickly qualified native practitioners in all professions and skills including teachers, nurses, mechanical engineers, communications technicians, management personnel, aircraft pilots and mechanics among others, with full provision for continuity and upgrading. Train and provide experience for native northerners in executive and administrative posts, especially in municipal levels and even at the risk of higher costs and mistakes (DIAND 1972: 35-36).

Despite vague references to maintaining Indigenous peoples' cultural heritage and developing renewable resources, no comparable strategies are outlined for maintaining Inuit cultural heritage or supporting Inuit hunting culture (DIAND 1972). Culture is neither discussed nor given serious consideration. In fact, a close reading suggests that support for "economic activities" replaces, supplants, or is seen as synonymous with support for Inuit culture. "Traditional pursuits," as referred to in the document, are considered to the extent that they can be capitalised upon to produce "useful" forms of wage employment. The report notes that the North's Aboriginal peoples could be effective "campsite supervisors, tourist guides, game and fire wardens" (ibid.: 36). The text mentions the need to forget "myths about the Eskimos," such as their wanting to continue their traditional life or their being unable to adapt to a southern lifestyle. On the contrary, it is reported that "some Eskimos have shown keen interest in the material aspects of modern society and an eagerness to adapt themselves to it" (ibid.: 24). This statement, while likely true, also needs to be interrogated in light of a history that set out to generate as much interest among Inuit in the material culture of "modern society" as possible. However, that this implies willingness—even a desire—to abandon or transform Inuit hunting culture into an industrial one is without foundation.

What further complicates our understanding is that, for historical reasons (the behaviour of the RCMP and *Qallunaat* officials), Inuit were inclined, at the time, to defer in considerable measure to the expectations that *Qallunaat* officials had of them (Brody 1975).⁶ The material culture of *Qallunaat* held considerable appeal for some—particularly the youth to whom Agar refers. Inuit participation in an industrial wage economy was portrayed as inevitable. With this assumption came its counterpart: that traditional Inuit culture would fade away. This was the dominant attitude of the day (McPherson 2003). Job training was needed to get Inuit there. The text of *Canada's North* is a gospel of modernisation, melding a seriously-taken role of accumulation with a titular nod to the legitimisation functions of the State.

In a speech to the Canadian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy Conference held in 1977 after the mine became operational, the President of MRI, Frank Agar, noted that in the process of negotiating a deal with the federal government he learned that DIAND's primary concern in granting a sought-after export license was the creation of employment opportunities for Inuit. It was not merely a side issue. MRI had no

⁶ In the context of Nanisivik, the so-called Inuk founder of the mine, Issiah Attagutsiak, was described by his grandson as being "[...] very obedient, being a traditional person. Our tradition tells us that we should obey [a] superior person, somebody that is paying us [...] so they treated the white *Qallunaat* as being superior, somebody who has more knowledge, more money. [...] it was not friendly relationships, it was more inferior-superior feeling" (Mishak Allurut in Lim 2011a).

problem accommodating. The company believed Inuit participation would be essential to success of the mine (Agar 1977).

To facilitate this participation, of the 200 jobs expected at Nanisivik, an Inuit employment target of 60% was set for the first three years of operation (Chrétien 1974b). A former member of the Arctic Bay Settlement Council during Nanisivik's development later suggested that an official from the Government of the Northwest Territories picked these figures "out of thin air" at a meeting between MRI and government representatives (Kenn Harper in Lim 2011c). In Agar's (in Tester 2012) own words: "60% was ridiculous!" The figures, however, gave the State what it needed to justify financial support. In signing the Strathcona Agreement, Chrétien (1974b: 1) claimed that the government's primary objective was to ensure "maximum benefit will flow to the residents of the region." "Maximum benefit" was to be almost exclusively in the form of employment opportunities. The wording, which leaves out a reference to employment, gives the uncritical reader the impression that other benefits might also be provided in the areas of health, welfare, and general well-being, as Inuit struggled with the drastic transformations in their lives. This impression was confirmed by media coverage. The commitment to "solv(ing) the problems of human resource development" was strictly a reference to job training.

This limited role for State and industry (providing employment) was emphasised in government planning documents and texts about the mine. It was noted repeatedly that the area suffered from un- and under-employment.⁷ Nanisivik would remedy the problem. *Qallunaat* fears of Inuit becoming economically dependent on the State guided this concern and emphasis on it. No attention was paid to helping Inuit manage money, time, and work—in relation to family and cultural interests and pursuits—or in addressing other social issues that might arise in transitioning from a predominantly hunting economy to an industrial one. Job training received some attention and was what the State was prepared to subsidise. Inuit working at the mine would set examples for others "of making one's own way as opposed to being on welfare" (Government of Canada 1973b: 4; see also Armstrong 1973: 10; Yates 1975: 11).

Bringing Inuit into the labour force was *the* motive for State involvement in Nanisivik.⁸ Inuit were defined as "labour," evidenced by the importance of the 60% employment target. This target, though questioned by some in both industry and government, was repeatedly cited in the extensive planning details of the project to justify the State's role. In the first two years of operation, 45% of Inuit worked no more than two months and only 14% stayed at their jobs longer than one year—a turnover rate of 86% (Baffin Region Inuit Association 1980). While Nanisivik would achieve one of the highest rates of Aboriginal employment in mines in northern Canada, in all

⁷ E.g., Chrétien's (1974a) recommendation to Cabinet.

⁸ While we are primarily concerned with the federal government in our discussion, the Government of the Northwest Territories also "viewed the social side of the project in the broad context of employing people" (Government of Canada 1973b: 4).

of its 26 years it still fell short of the 60% target by more than half, reaching a peak of 28% (McPherson 2003).

Inuit resistance to the way labour was conceptualised—to wage employment defined as a full-time, steady job, and their assimilation into a modern industrial economy—was evident in the high turnover for mines in the Eastern Arctic. The turnover rate for Inuit labour appears to be considerably higher than for non-Inuit labour. In Yukon mines, where about 40% of the labour force is Aboriginal, it is currently about 25% (Derome et al. 2012). This compares with a national industry rate, depending on the level and type of employment, of between 8.3 and 25% (Mining Industry Human Resources Council 2010). A similar turnover rate (of about 80%) has been reported for the Meadowbank gold mine currently operating north of Baker Lake in the Kivalliq region (Bell 2012). There appear to be good cultural reasons. Wenzel (1983) argues that Inuit from Clyde River, after being flown to the Nanisivik site, treated employment during the construction phase as a strategy to support traditional pursuits:

It appears that at least some of the Clyde Inuit who engaged in the Nanisivik commuter system did so with little serious intention of active continuation of commuter labor as defined by Hobart [...]. Rather, a number of hunters selectively exploited this wage opportunity solely for the purpose of recapitalizing themselves and their associates for participation in the Clyde subsistence economy (Wenzel 1983: 90).

Then—and now—Inuit labour practices often resist the definition of labour and modernisation consistent with the objective of accumulation found with both State and private-sector actors.

Understanding the State's construction of Inuit

Whenever government departments discussed the Nanisivik site, these discussions were revealing in how the accumulation and legitimisation functions of the State were articulated. DIAND was the lead department for the initiative (Yates 1975). Its mandate overlapped with those of other departments, including the Department of Energy, Mines, and Resources (EMR). EMR primarily interpreted the federal role in economic terms. It did not see federal involvement as providing the government with sufficient economic benefit and questioned State subsidy of a private venture. Ironically as the project progressed, EMR's criticisms were overridden within DIAND by appeals to the project's positive social implications. EMR officials, on the other hand, started to articulate social reasons for not proceeding with the project. The archival record leaves the reader with the impression that it was EMR that was socially concerned about the introduction of Inuit to an industrial economy. This concern may have been genuine or part of a discursive strategy to raise objections "when all else failed." EMR officials explicitly questioned the utility of the project for the government's social goals. J.S. Ross of EMR wrote in March 1974:

Experience in Canada and in economically undeveloped regions in which indigenous people reside indicates that the social and economic problems are not of the type best remedied by a few giant industrial projects. Certainly, if the project does proceed, very definite and positive government action would be required to ensure that the objective of providing optimum benefits to the Inuit be guaranteed (Ross 1974: 8).

This position was not pursued vigorously by Ross. Rather, he tackled the statistics on Inuit employment, comparing the number of Inuit estimated to benefit from the project with what the investment would cost the State. In these terms it was deemed expensive and risky. Ross (1974: 9) argued that expenditures per-Inuk should be halved, or that “other types of subsidized employment should be developed wherein the Inuit would receive assistance in a more direct and less risky manner and at the same time prevent their unnecessary relocation [for] the project.” At the time, consideration was being given to relocating the entire community to the Nanisivik site, a proposal strongly resisted by Inuit of Ikpiarjuk (Cowan 1976). Tom Demcheson (in Lim 2011b), Settlement Manager of Arctic Bay during Nanisivik’s development, indicated that plans for relocating Arctic Bay’s population to Nanisivik were being pushed by the Department of Economic Development of the Northwest Territories. According to the Canadian Arctic Resources Committee and interviews conducted with residents before the mine opened, Inuit wanted to live on the beach at Ikpiarjuk and were not keen on having the community at the mine site, which was comparatively far back from the water (Gibson 1975). If the federal government’s top priority was merely to find employment for Inuit, Ross was of the opinion that such employment could be found elsewhere. His argument against State subsidy of Inuit employment went unheard.

Inuit, however, did not understand themselves merely as “labour.” They had other priorities: family and extended family relations, traditional pursuits—notably hunting, fishing, and, in the case of Ikpiarjuk, hunting narwhal—and cultural and community events. It is telling that in Nanisivik’s early years of operation, consistent with observations made by Wenzel (1983) in the case of Clyde River, Inuit incomes were spent predominantly on resource harvesting equipment (Baffin Region Inuit Association 1980). Work primarily served to fulfil these priorities. Once sufficient income had been earned to meet these needs—even in the short term—the regime and rigours of industrial employment had little appeal, as suggested by statistics on labour turnover.

Some research justifying the Nanisivik project misrepresented activities that had taken place elsewhere. In a 1974 memorandum to the Cabinet by Chrétien (1974a: 2) recommending approval in principle, the mine at Rankin Inlet was cited as evidence that Inuit could become successful workers, so long as there was “sufficient assistance [...] for relocation, training and counselling.” The Inuit experience 10 years earlier with the North Rankin Nickel Mine was described in ways contradicted by the historical record. DIAND referred to Inuit employment at the mine on the west coast of Hudson Bay between 1957 and 1962 “as being successful although mine closure created (and continues to create) problems for some Inuit employees” (DIAND 1974c: vi). In the

case of Nanisivik, the same document notes the importance of making contingency plans for mine closure to minimise problems that might arise (ibid.: vi-vii).⁹

The record paints a different picture of what happened at Rankin Inlet. Williamson (1974: 115) notes that absenteeism was often explained by a “psychological and material need to hunt.” Williamson, who thoroughly chronicles life in Rankin Inlet at the time, does not explore how money was used to maintain a hunting culture. His research indicates a desire on the part of many Inuit to return to hunting after the closure of the mine, a picture complicated by the number of respondents also willing to go elsewhere to work and the desire to have alternative employment in the community (ibid.: 131). These observations should not be decoupled. They suggest the same pattern: the desire and necessity of having some form of wage employment to make a hunting lifestyle possible. Some Rankin miners successfully transferred to the Asbestos Hill mine operating in Northern Ungava at the time. They returned to Rankin Inlet when the mine shut down. Some then went to work at Lynn Lake Manitoba. Nine men went to gold mines in Yellowknife, and three former employees went as far as Tungsten in the Yukon (Williamson 1974). After a few years, most returned to Rankin Inlet.

While some Inuit enjoyed their employment at the Rankin Mine, this was not uniformly the case. Internal memos of those planning the Nanisivik mine lack any reference to how Inuit reacted to what happened at the Rankin mine. No former miners were consulted. The context for these operations was also different, with many Inuit working on a rotating schedule at Nanisivik. In Rankin, Inuit resided in or near the settlement where the mine was located.

While departmental officials generally praised Inuit employment at Rankin Inlet, one of them, at a 1973 interdepartmental meeting, had a clearer idea of the mine closure’s downside, noting that he did not want Nanisivik to be “another Rankin” (Government of Canada 1973a: 22). Rankin Inlet experienced considerable and long-term hardship with closure of the mine in 1962. Having given up their dog-teams and previous way of life, Inuit at Rankin Inlet confronted settlement living, many of them far from their homelands and dwelling with people they did not know. Wage employment and settlement living affected the structure and content of Inuit culture. The HBC, for the first time in the region, operated a small department store that sold housewares as well as food. Women changed from being producers of the necessities of everyday life to being consumers. Inuit were portrayed as labourers and consumers. The same was planned for Nanisivik.

Housing and sanitary conditions were appalling at Rankin Inlet. There were no laundry facilities. Housing was of poor quality with no running water or toilets other than the infamous “honey bucket”: a plastic garbage bag that lined a metal toilet and that was pitched outside when full, in hopes that someone would collect it before it disappeared in the snow. As Inuit came to depend on store-bought food and did less

⁹ What actually happened with respect to closure is the subject of Lim et al. (2012).

hunting, nutrition became a serious problem (Dailey and Dailey 1961; Moore 1962; Rudnicki 1961; Stewart 1964). While the mining company did provide some health services, in October 1962, within a few months of the mine's closure, government officials were "totally dismayed at the unclean condition of the mine hospital" (Millican 1962: 1).

The extent of public health problems was evident from the infant mortality rate in the settlement. In 1958, six of the 16 babies (or 37.5%) born in Rankin Inlet died within two months of birth (Dailey and Dailey 1961). While the sample size was small, this settlement in a First World country had an infant mortality rate greatly exceeding that of Third World countries at the time (United Nations 2011). Walter Rudnicki, a social worker and Chief of the Welfare Division of the Northern Administration Branch of DIAND, described the community in 1961 as suffering from below-standard housing and a population living on credit between pay cheques, courtesy of the Hudson's Bay Company. He noted that doctors, nurses, and teachers were concerned about nutritional standards among wage-earning Inuit and that other needs for community and human development were unmet (Rudnicki 1961: 2). None of these observations informed the rhetoric of DIAND in promoting the project or translated into plans to meet social and cultural needs that would likely develop at Nanisivik with industrial employment.

Perhaps with this record in mind, one EMR official, observing the enthusiasm within DIAND for the Nanisivik project, remarked: "The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs tended to downplay criticisms of the [feasibility] report and overstress the benefits to the natives of the north if the project went ahead" (Gauvin 1973: 2). DIAND tried to justify the mine not only by ignoring or failing to examine the history of the Rankin mine, but also by appropriating Inuit culture for their purposes. With regard to mine closure, a DIAND official opined at one interdepartmental meeting: "Inuit are historically a highly mobile people" (Government of Canada 1973a: 24).¹⁰ The State wished to aid and abet the private accumulation of capital and hoped that employment would address its legitimisation functions. It thus generated a discourse and rationale that was challenged by a historical record it chose to ignore. Inuit were thus constructed as "adaptable or malleable people" who would happily relocate anywhere, an idea that recalls the cultural essentialism used to justify the 1953 relocation of Inuit from Arctic Quebec to the High Arctic (Marcus 1995; Tester and Kulchyski 1994).

Culture was used and misused in other ways to justify federal involvement. The legitimisation function of the State was contained or restricted by rationalisations made about Inuit, who were seen as adaptable and therefore in need of little help in dealing with change. Other than a clause to ensure that southern workers would be familiarised with some elements of Inuit cultural traditions, Inuit culture is mentioned only twice in the Strathcona Agreement:

¹⁰ However, it was also noted at the same meeting that most Inuit had remained in the community of Rankin Inlet after the mine had closed, "creating the largest community in Keewatin" (Government of Canada 1973a: 25).

the company will endeavour to develop work schedules compatible with the traditional pursuits of northern residents (Section 4.9.b)

the company is to provide all working and safety instructions in Eskimo syllabics and the official languages of Canada (Clause 4.13) (Government of Canada 1974: 7).

There was a subtle difference in wording between the only two clauses about Inuit culture. The one about language was a necessity; the other, about logistic and economic implications for the company, discretionary. In the planning process, minimal mention was made of social impacts (e.g., DIAND 1974d). Problems that could reasonably have been anticipated were not explored, nor were steps taken to address them. When information was sent to the Cabinet as part of the department's request for project approval, no reference was made to any cultural implications or concerns (see Chrétien 1974a).

Conclusion

The Nanisivik Mine is a case study in the accumulation and legitimisation functions of the State at a critical moment when attempts were made to move Inuit to an industrial economy. The record suggests the extent to which these functions governed State decisions and constructions of Inuit. At the same time, in a geographic context where Inuit were "out of sight and out of mind" for the Canadian polity, State attention to legitimisation functions was minimal to the point of being nonexistent. To reassure the Canadian public, the State was able to manage its legitimisation functions through language: the creation of texts and discourse that gave the impression that social concerns were being addressed. In practice these social concerns were reduced to the provision of employment: a trickle-down approach assuming that employment would take care of other social and cultural problems.

The Nanisivik mine's employment and turnover rates suggest the indelible and enduring importance of culture in defining and maintaining Inuit identity. Where employment interfered with or restricted other culturally important activities, employment opportunities appear to have been sacrificed. The transfer to wage employment also has contemporary implications for mental health and social problems in places like Qamani'tuaq (Baker Lake) and other communities of Nunavut currently inundated with proposals for mining operations. Of the 276 Inuit hired in 2011 at the current Meadowbank gold mine north of Qamani'tuaq, 229 (close to 85%) left mine employment within a year of hiring, many in the first few months (Bell 2012). This suggests the persistence of considerations evident from a historical review of the Nanisivik operation. As in the case of Nanisivik, Inuit cultural aspirations in relation to industrial development remain largely unaddressed.

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Note: LAC = Library and Archives of Canada

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